

## NET.FLAG

*net.flag* is a flag for the Internet. Through an online flag editor and a database of flag components, *net.flag* appropriates the visual language of international flags to create a “soft” flag that can be altered by anyone that visits it. The emblems of national identity lose their immutability and become malleable components for this ever-changing flag of the Internet.

The visitor to *net.flag* not only views the flag but can change it in a moment to reflect his or her own national, political, apolitical or personal agenda. The resulting flag is both an emblem and a micro territory in its own right; a place for confrontation, assertion, communication and play.

### Territory

Every nation on earth has a flag that identifies the territory of that nation. One of the most memorable images of the 20th century is a scene of the United States flag planted in the rocky terrain of the moon, the emblem of an earthbound territory apparently identifying the entire planet, or laying claim to the moon itself.

In the new millenium we see nations trying to lay claim to a new kind of territory, the Internet. This virtual territory is not a geographic location, a new land with resources to be claimed. It is a space created by man-made infrastructure that carries the potential of information, group identity, economic and political advantage. Nations and terrorists alike use the Internet to carry out their agendas. Those who control the structures, both hard and soft, that make this new space, control the nature of the space itself, providing or limiting access to the resources of the network. In the midst of this new space are the users of the Internet, the early pioneers and later visitors that explore the potential of this worldwide public space. These early adopters have had an unprecedented freedom to explore new concepts of national and personal identity in the distributed geography of the net. The familiar “dot com” of the Internet domain replaces the nation-state in a world where most nations do not yet have official representation. Yet recently we see political powers taking action to control this space. What relationship is possible between national identities and the fluid, distributed domain branding that flourishes on the net? Will personal and corporate domains replace nation-states, and if so, will flags become obsolete, quaint symbols like the heralds and coats of arms that adorn European castles? As the Internet crosses the already porous borders of nations, what new relationships emerge between the individual and the monolithic notion of national identity?

### Software

The Internet is an environment built on software. The structures of this man-made environment can be designed to restrict the individual in their relationship to the group and to the resources of the environment or not. The interfaces of the Internet can enable or restrict access to information, speech, and resources. Within this environment we see the legal issues of the past 500 years acted out in fast motion: issues of ownership, control, power, and economics.



Can national identity persist in a post-geographic world? *net.flag* explores the question by presenting a software flag as an alternative to the physical flag we normally see at the top of flag poles. Where the physical flag flies high so it can be seen from a distance and command a larger territory, the *net.flag* is as close as your monitor. Where the physical flag is an untouchable emblem, the *net.flag* is easily “touched” and changed with a mouse and keyboard.

### Re-figure

The individual faces new options in determining their identity as a “netizen,” a citizen of the Internet. And nations face new challenges in maintaining their identities, as borders become increasingly porous and cultures are diluted by exposure to mass media. Communities form according to the social topography of the Internet. Configurable, overlapping, rapidly evolving. In September 11 we see monolithic structures toppled by nimble, networked groups operating across national borders unified not by location or nationality but by ideology, often extreme ideology.

When we remove the convenient divisions of geography we are faced with a lack of identifying boundaries. The individual is suddenly a member of the group of all people using the Internet, millions of individuals spread throughout the world. Suddenly the individual has to create new communities and new identities, in order to organize their relationship to this huge meta-community. Unlike the geographic communities left behind, these virtual categories and communities are re-configurable. They can change rapidly by the choices of the members and also by the software structures that create the topography of the Internet.

In this ongoing creation and re-creation we find recreation. This software environment becomes a place for play. While we may be criticized for burning or defacing an actual flag, we may re-arrange the software flag indefinitely without ever (apparently) scarring an actual physical emblem. In the malleable world of software the flag loses its sanctity, and thus loses some of its authority. Through this chink in authority we enter into a new relationship of the individual to the ideas of statehood and humanity.

---

*net.flag* is created by Mark Napier (design and programming) with Liza Sabater (editor), Josep Arimany Piella (research assistant), and Zachary Lieberman (additional programming). *net.flag* was commissioned for the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.